

FIRST PERSON

plural

A film by Deann Borshay Liem



The two Cha Jung Hees. Photo courtesy of the Borshay family.

Dear Facilitator,

First Person Plural takes a close look at my two families and the contradictions and everyday ironies of our relationship. While sometimes skeptical about the making of this film, both families were always supportive, encouraging, and willing to go out on a limb and simply be themselves.

I hope, with the help of this guide, others will be able to embrace the courageous spirit of our journey and also use the film as a tool for discussing difficult issues — race, assimilation, family, cultural identity, adoption — and their influence on our lives.

My deepest thanks to the TRI staff and to our advisors for making this guide possible.

Deann Borshay Liem, Producer/Director



Television Race Initiative
A Project of P.O.V./American
Documentary, Inc.

POV

DISCUSSION GUIDE



Deann's passport picture, taken when she came to the United States.

First Person Plural tells the story of Korean-born Deann Borshay Liem. In 1966, 13 years after the Korean War, eight-year-old Deann was brought to the United States by white, American, adoptive parents who raised her as a member of their family. In this film, Deann makes the startling discovery that she isn't who everyone thought she was, and that her Korean birth family is alive.

The discovery stirs deep emotions for both of Deann's families. They can't change the past, and they don't have easy answers to offer. What they do have is a daughter they love. For them, that's reason enough to agree to participate in Deann's journey of self-discovery. Their willingness to engage in the process, even when it's painful, and to accept and honor each other, even when questioning each other's motives and actions, is a powerful example of commitment and respect.



Deann's Korean mother.



The Sun Duck Orphanage circa 1960.

Deann's families are role models for anyone who attempts to engage others in difficult discussions, including dialogue about race.

This guide offers some suggestions on how you might begin these conversations. To assess your audience's interests or needs, you might ask a question such as: "If you were to describe this film to a friend, what would you say?" Then you can use the questions in this guide to follow up or to direct the discussion to a particular issue.



Archival stills from the Sun Duck Orphanage.



To take best advantage of the opportunities provided by *First Person Plural*, you may want to prompt group members to consider external realities, such as adoption regulations, as well as personal and societal attitudes — what it means to be an American, for example, and how that defines us. To close the discussion, encourage participants to transform their insights into actions.

How do we define ourselves?

- How do Deann's conflicting feelings about her identity affect her relationship with her American and Korean families?



Deann's with her adoptive mother. Courtesy the Borshay family.

- Why was it important to Deann to not forget Korea? How and why did her attitudes about this change? How did forgetting Korea affect Deann's self-identity and self-esteem?

- What kinds of conflicts result from the pressure to assimilate into mainstream culture?

• *"What struck me when I was with my Korean family was the physical similarity, the amazing feeling of looking at somebody's face that one resembles. Because for so many years I had looked into blue eyes, blond hair, and, all of a sudden, there are these people in the room who, when I looked at them, I could see parts of myself in them. There's sort of a physical closeness, as if my body remembers something, but my mind is resistant."*

Deann Borshay Liem, filmmaker

What is your reaction to this quote? How important is it to look like your family?

- What unique experiences does a child of color have growing up in a white home or a predominantly white environment?

What does it mean to be an American?

- If you had to instruct someone on how to be an American, what would you teach them?

- Deann says that one of the ways she learned about being American was by watching TV. What ideas about being American would someone get from the TV programs you watch?



Deann as 1977 homecoming queen, Washington High School.

• *"What I can't help as a red-blooded American boy, only knowing America and this culture. . . I think it's superior to everywhere else in the world, in every way. That may be arrogant and condescending of me, but I can't help it."*

Duncan Borshay, Deann's brother

What is your reaction to this quote? How do you think views like this affect the actions and behavior of people who hold such views? How do views like this affect people from different countries and cultures? How might such beliefs shape public policy regarding people from other nations?

- Do you know anyone who shares Duncan Borshay's opinion of America? How might it influence a family's decision to share with an adoptive child the culture of her/his homeland? How might it affect sibling relationships when the adopted child's heritage is different from that of the children born to the family?

- How was Deann's experience of becoming an American influenced by her race and cultural background? How does being part of a racial minority differ from being part of a visible majority? How much is a child being asked to "give up" in order to have "membership" in another society?

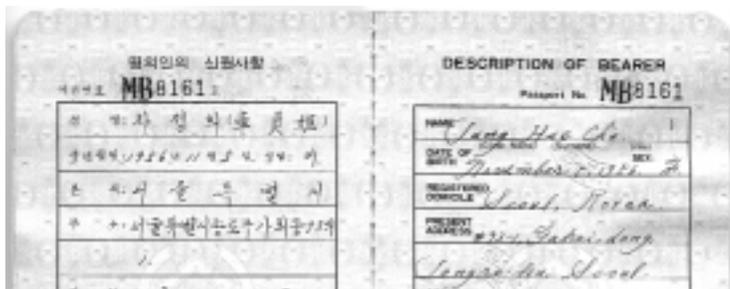
- Is being "colorblind" a positive American value or goal?

International adoption issues

- How do war, poverty, race, gender and global relationships influence adoption?
- Considering what you saw and heard in the film, why do you think Deann's family gave her up for adoption? Would they have considered adoption if the family hadn't been so poor? How did America's involvement in Korea and the Korean War influence her birth mother's decision?
- *"We should do something for someone, life's been good to us. . . I said to your Daddy, I'd like to adopt. . ."*
Alveen Borshay, Deann's American mother

Recognizing the good intentions expressed in Alveen Borshay's quote, do you have any concerns about this attitude?

- People who are trying to find good homes for American-born children might wonder why Americans would seek to adopt children from other countries first. How would you respond to this?
- Historically, charitable and religious organizations played significant roles in encouraging adoption of children from war-torn or developing countries. To what extent do religious beliefs provide moral validation for Americans who choose to adopt "underprivileged" children? What moral, ethical or political issues about international adoption does this film raise for you?



Action steps

To help your group make the transition from conversation to action, you might ask them to consider:

- How would you fill in the blanks? "This evening I learned or I realized. . . . Now I will. . . ."
- What is happening with adoption in my community? Which children are being adopted and which aren't? What are the obstacles to finding adoptive homes? What is the role of process or policy?
- What is my role as a resident of this community? (You may want to have the group brainstorm a list of possible actions.)

Suggested activities:

- Start a reading group. Pick a book that addresses issues raised in *First Person Plural* — self-identity, reconciling cultural differences, transracial adoption, acceptance and belonging in one's family — and let the film deepen your reading group's conversations.
- Organize a writing workshop.
- Partner with a local community group to host a discussion on the film and more general issues of race and identity. Invite a speaker from an international adoption agency and a speaker from a domestic adoption agency to compare the two processes.
- Plan a time to sit down with your own family to talk about the film and how different cultures define "family."

Resources



Deann's naturalization certificate.

Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute

(212) 269-5080 www.adoptioninstitute.org

The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute improves the quality of information about adoption and advances adoption policy and practice. The results of the Adoption Institute's "Survey of Adult Korean Adoptees" was an important contextual piece for *First Person Plural*.

Holt International Children's Services

(541) 687-2202 www.holtintl.org

Founded by Americans Harry and Bertha Holt to deal with children in Korea left orphaned by the Korean War, Holt International's current work encompasses many countries.

National Adoption Information Clearinghouse

(888) 251-0075 www.calib.com/naic

Links to related government sites and references.

Pact, An Adoption Alliance

(415) 221-6957 www.pactadopt.org

Pact provides the highest quality adoption services to children of color. In order to do this, Pact addresses the needs of all the child's parents, by advising families facing a crisis pregnancy and by offering lifelong education to adoptive families and birth families on matters of race and adoption.

For additional resources, please contact P.O.V. for a copy of "Delve Deeper into First Person Plural," a guide to books, Web sites and films produced by Booklist, the review journal of the American Library Association. After December 11, 2000, go to www.pbs.org/firstpersonplural for other educational resources.



Deann's passport.



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First Person Plural is a featured program of the Television Race Initiative (a project of P.O.V./American Documentary, Inc.), a multiyear effort in which diverse, character-driven, high-profile television broadcasts create a spine for sustained community dialogue and problem-solving on the issue of race relations. In partnership with national and community-based organizations, TRI uses storytelling — initially in the form of several public television broadcasts — to “break the ice” and encourage essential conversations that lead to constructive action.

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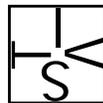


First Person Plural had its national broadcast premiere on December 18, 2000, on PBS' acclaimed showcase for independent non-fiction film, P.O.V. (a cinematic term for “point of view”). A laboratory for television's potential, P.O.V. amplifies broadcasts by pioneering media innovation, interaction and impact through a wide range of energetic broadcast-related activities including, *Talking Back: Video and Digital Letters to P.O.V.*, High Impact Television (HITV) and P.O.V. Interactive.

First Person Plural is co-presented by the National Asian American Telecommunications Association (NAATA). Through film, radio and new technologies, NAATA aims to promote better understanding of the Asian Pacific American experience to the broadest audience possible.



First Person Plural was produced in association with the Independent Television Service (www.itvs.org), with funds provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. ITVS seeks to create and promote independent media that expands civic participation by bringing new voices and expressiveness into the public discourse.



VHS copies of *First Person Plural* may be ordered from Transit Media, (800) 343-5540.



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